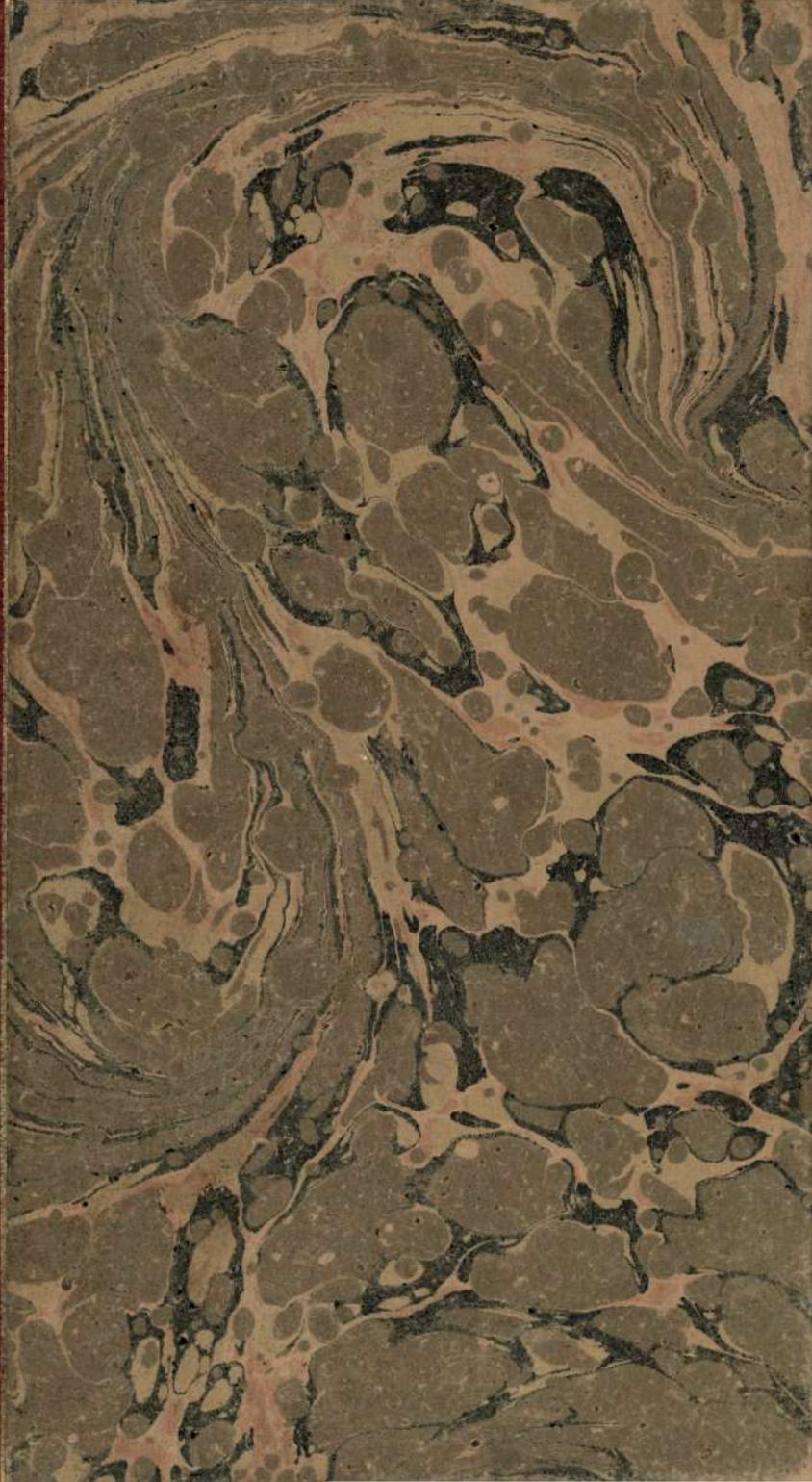


GOVERNOR  
LEE

—  
1745-1819



A Sketch of the Life

of

GOVERNOR THOMAS SIM LEE

1745-1819

by

C. L.

*Cassie Letterman (?)*

THOMAS SIM LEE.

1745 - 1819.

Thomas Sim Lee, the second American Governor of the State of Maryland, served his first term during the most critical period of the Revolution, (1779-1782), that is, so far as Maryland was concerned. He was but 34 years of age at the time of his election in the autumn of 1779, but had already been two years at Annapolis, called thither by Governor Johnson, and later elected to be a member of the Governor's Council.

Governor Lee came of old Virginia Stock. He was the great, great, grandson

of Colonel Richard Lee, the pioneer of the Lee family who landed in Virginia in 1641, and whose most successful career - political, social and commercial - laid the foundation of the family fortunes. According to the College of Heralds he was descended from John Lee of Coton Hall, Shropshire. (1)

In the year 1700, one of the latter's grandsons, Philip Lee, left Virginia, crossed the Maryland border and settled in Lord Baltimore's Province on land owned by his energetic Grandfather. The latter's "acquiring hand", to quote from "The Lees of Virginia", (2) "even reached over the river and added a

(1) Stratford Hall, page 7, Ethel Arms

(2) By Burton J. Hendrick, page 21.

Maryland Grant to his domain, destined to become the "Blenheim" of the Maryland Lees. Philip is said to have built "Blenheim", his homestead, and to have lived there en Grand Seigneur. (1)

It was here in his Grandfather's home that Thomas Sim Lee was born in 1745, the son of Thomas Lee and Christiana Sim. His parents having died while he was still a child, he was confided to the care of his Mother's family.

It had been the custom of the family in Virginia through several generations to send their eldest sons to Oxford or

(1) Blenheim was unfortunately burnt to the ground and no trace of it remains.

Cambridge, but it is thought that Thomas Sim Lee, being the son of a younger son, was educated by tutors or at one of the excellent private schools, of which several then existed in the South.

According to a tradition in the family (for no portrait of him exists) young Lee grew into a handsome man, over six feet four inches in height, well proportioned and of commanding presence. He inherited but a small portion of the family fortune, but this did not prevent him from aspiring to the hand of Miss Mary Digges, only child and heiress of

Ignatius Digges, a prominent Catholic and great landed proprietor. The Digges, like the Lees, had come over the border from Virginia and one, Edward Digges, had served a term as Governor of that Colony. Lee was not considered a match for the lady and his suit was unsuccessful.

He is then said (through unconfirmed family tradition) to have set sail for England, hoping to obtain a position in the Great East India Company, through the influence of his English relatives. These relatives, Lees also, were descendants of the same

Richard Lee, one of whose sons had returned to live in England and probably took charge of the family interests there, England being the best client of the American Colonies. Colonel Richard Lee frequently spent months at a time there, at his place in Stratford-Langton, which he had bought shortly after his marriage. Sold at his death, the place now forms part of greater London. (1)

Nothing is known of the date of Thomas Sim Lee's departure from the Colonies nor of his stay in England, (except that he is said to have played

- (1) "Stratford Hall" by Ethel Arms, page 21.  
"Lees of Virginia" by Hendrick page 23.

Whist at Bath with Lord Chesterfield) or whether the position he sought was about to materialize. The only reference to it in the family archives is a letter dated London, December 30, 1771, from "his affectionate relative Philip Thomas Lee", congratulating the young man on his marriage and adding: "You no longer envy the East India Nabobs, neither are you thinking at all about them." It is possible that the position was about to be offered him when, before committing himself finally, he returned to the Colonies to try again for the hand of Mary Digges.

This time he was successful - Mr. Digges gave his consent, after the usual religious promises had been made, over Lee's signature, but the manner does not seem to have been very gracious. The father is alleged to have said: "Mary will not marry without my consent. I cannot force her to marry another, therefore you may have her." However, consent at last being given, the marriage took place at the Digges' home, Melwood Park, Upper Marlborough, Maryland, October 27, 1771.

It is presumed that the young people lived for a time with Mr. Digges, but

possessing the desire so strong in those days for the ownership of large tracts of land (the only way then to make a living in the South) Lee began to acquire some acres of his own. As early as 1775, he bought land in Western Maryland, where it was cheaper and more fertile than on the Eastern Shore. By 1782, when his first term of Governor had lapsed, the investment had grown to several thousand acres, including among other parcels, the Merryland Tract, the quaintly named "Lost Pen and Ink" and Needwood Forest. It was on this last bit of land (purchased from a clever though eccentric Englishman

locally known as Parson Booth) that he chose to build his house.

He does not appear in public life until 1777, though his openly expressed sympathy with the Colonists in their struggle estranged many Tory friends and brought a severe rebuke from his Uncle Richard Lee, of Blenheim. As has been already stated, he became a Member of the Governor's Council in the year 1777, and was elected himself Executive of the State in 1779.

On his accession, he was not slow to recognize the desperate plight of Maryland. The great rebellion had enter-

ed on its most critical phase and called forth all the vigour and ability of the new Governor who for the next two years, up to the surrender of Cornwallis and after, laboured with superhuman energy.

He found the State overwhelmingly in debt, with its currency and that of the Continental Congress practically valueless. In addition to this, efforts were being made to redeem a previous issue of State Bills at the rate of \$1. to \$40, one of the new to forty of the old. "Taxes in kind were resorted to and the citizens appear to have cheerfully paid their last dollar into the Treasury

and then to have contributed a share of their provisions as well...." (1)

"The Governor's salary was paid in kind and consisted of 4,500 bushels of wheat.....The whole amount of coin in the State did not exceed £ 100,000.. ...All kinds of money were resorted to: Continental bills, provincial bills, State bills, black money and red money! None were of much value." (2)

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland".  
Vol.II. page 477.

(2) Scharf's "History of Maryland".  
Vol. II, page 477.

That the situation called for unremitting energy on the part of the authorities, civil and military, may best be realized by the following quotation:

"The year 1780 witnessed a depression that probably went deeper and was more wide-spread than at any other time during the war. The energies of Americans were more nearly spent, commerce was non-existent, credit was gone.....Maryland was the strategic point of the Campaign of 1780, connecting as it did the North with the South. Fortunately for Washington and the Continental Cause, Maryland possessed at this juncture a Chief Executive whose patriotism never flagged and whose energies seemed inexhaustible: Thomas Sim Lee, elected to the post in the previous year". (1).

(1)"Letters of Jas.McHenry to Governor T.S.Lee". Introduction by Miss E.S.Kite.

Military conditions were critical in the extreme. Enemy forces were burning and pillaging plantations and villages along the Coast and at the mouths of rivers in Maryland, and Baltimore, though referred to by the British as "a nest of pirates" (1) was practically defenceless. The State authorities responded to these depredations by the confiscation of Tory property.

In spite of her desperate plight, Maryland managed to "carry on", and her citizens must be proud to realize that notwithstanding the odds against it, "no

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland".  
Vol. II, 249.

State clung so faithfully to Washington in all his trials, and no State furnished more troops, or as many, for the Continental Army, according to the proportion fixed by Congress.....Washington appealed to Maryland at all times when her help was needed. His trust in her was never dishonoured. Maryland never faltered in the Cause....Her troops fought gallantly all the way from Boston to Savannah, under officers not of their own selection nor of their own State.....They constituted two-thirds of the Southern Army in the field.

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland"  
Vol. II, 351-379.

By February 1781, Maryland was in imminent danger. She lay directly in the path of the converging British forces, between Cornwallis' Army in the South, the British fleet under Arnold in the Chesapeake and Clinton on the North. Both Washington and Lee were keenly alive to the peril in the event of a British success on any front, and the Governor called forth all the resources of the State to meet the crisis. It was at this time, early in February that the Marquis de Lafayette arrived in Annapolis, accompanied by one of Washington's former Aides, Colonel James McHenry, of Baltimore, a

friend of Governor Lee. Their orders were to cooperate with the French Navy in its attempt to blockade Arnold's squadron. In response to Washington's letter requesting Governor Lee to render Lafayette all the assistance in his power, Lee "acted with vigour, impressing ships, wagon teams and supplies." (1)

He then notified Lafayette that "we have ordered all the vessels at Baltimore and in this port (Annapolis) to be impressed.....to transport the detachment under your Command, and have directed that 600 Bbls. of Bread be forwarded to them...

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland"  
Vol. II, 347.

This State will most cheerfully make every exertion to give force and efficiency to the present important expedition by every measure in our power." (1)

In all his patriotic endeavors the Governor was ably assisted by his wife who with the Ladies of Maryland worked unceasingly for the troops. Mrs. Lee, having written to Washington to ask what they needed most, received his assurance of the "High sense I entertain of the patriotic exertions of the Ladies of Maryland", with the suggestion that "the

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland"  
Vol. II. 347.

money collected could not be expended in so eligible and beneficial a manner as in the purchase of shirts and black socks for the use of the troops in the Southern Army." (1)

Major-General Nathaniel Greene, Commander of the entire Southern Army, next appeared on the scene, with an introduction from Washington, for the purpose of putting "subscriptions on foot for his Army". He also was cordially received and entertained by Governor Lee and his request for recruits and supplies facilitated by the Legislature.

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland"  
Vol. II. 380.

Months passed in the manoeuvres which were slowly pushing Cornwallis towards his final encampment at Yorktown while the other forces were being held at bay, and all the while Governor Lee was working feverishly to strengthen the hands of Washington. He wrote the Commander-in-Chief on August 30, that he "might rely on every exertion that it is possible for us to make to accelerate the movements of the Army on an expedition that must hasten the independence of America, and we have directed State officers to procure immediately by purchase or seizure 5000 head of cattle and

a large quantity of flour." The following day he assured Robert Morris that:

"Everything that is within our power, within the exhausted abilities of this State, will be done cheerfully to promote and render effectual the expedition which His Excellency General Washington has formed against the British in Virginia." (1)

He gave the State officials no respite, urging them continually to better endeavors, for he realized fully the vital importance of success or failure. He wrote the County Commissioners that:

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland"  
Vol. II, 459.

"There never has been a time which required the exertions of this State more than the present. The fate of Lord Cornwallis and his army will in great measure depend on them. Relying, therefore, on your patriotism, zeal and activity, we trust that you will do everything in your power to procure," etc. Etc. (1)

The last contingent of troops sent by Lee consisted of 2065 men whom he pledged to remain with Washington until the end by giving to each recruit 50 acres of land. (2)

It is interesting to know that in the midst of his arduous duties Washington found time to thank the Maryland Executive for the efforts he was making. Shortly before the surrender on

- (1) Scharf's "History of Maryland" Vol. II, 459, Letter of Sept. 5, 1781.
- (2) From Miss E. S. Kite's Introduction, "Letters of J. S. McHenry to Gov. Lee."

October 12, 1781, the Commander-in-Chief wrote:

"Give me leave to return you my sincerest thanks for your exertions. The supplies granted by the State are so liberal that they remove any apprehension of want." (1)

Governor Lee was kept abreast of the situation at Headquarters not only by General Washington, but also by his friend Colonel McHenry whose interesting series of letters, only lately discovered and printed, give a picture at first hand of the conditions at Yorktown, and "by their tone reflect the generosity and sincerity of the Maryland Executive."

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland"  
Vol. II, 459.

Some of these letters were confided to fellow-officers for delivery, but most of them bear the superscription:

"To be forwarded by Chain of Express",

or

"The Express is to ride night and day."

They begin in the Spring of 1781, and on April 27th, McHenry writes:

"It was a maxim with Cardinal de Retz always after a series of good news, to prepare himself for bad. We are following his Lordship (Cornwallis was then 'looking towards Carolina'). You know our force, it is as nothing. I need not speak to you of Greene's. In the confidence of friendship, my dear Governor, let me observe that, if you have any troops to send forward, it is of the utmost importance to make them march an instant measure.....Our affairs are critical. Administration must be

energetic. I know that you are of a decisive cast, and that you will not scruple to confide your reputation, when it is your Country which demands the stake, to men who will never suffer it to sink.....Let the people clamour, but save the State. I cannot help telling you that I apprehend the greatest evil from procrastination, and I am sure that neither of us wishes to shed tears over a peace."

On July 10th, comes the good news that "Maryland is relieved by the enemy's establishing themselves in York river, but", the writer adds, "there is no knowing how long you will be safe..  
...There was a time when we could blunder with impunity, but a blunder now would be fatal. I need not be more explicit to Your Excellency.....The

enemy do not lose sight of Baltimore."

By August the letters become more hopeful, though troops are still being asked for with the remark that "their march, if possible, should be made with wings!" Then follows the news that the British Garrison have been removed to York and that "his Lordship begins to look as if he wished to do something."

On September 1st, McHenry says:

"We are just going to begin the Campaign", and after this comes the welcome announcement of the arrival of Comte de Grasse, "with 22 ships of the line", his fight with Rodney and the

latter's defeat when, to quote McHenry, "the British saved themselves, as it is said we have sometimes done, by running away."

From October 2nd to 16th, McHenry writes almost daily giving detailed descriptions of the progress of the siege and stating that "if we are successful we may talk of the gulph from which we have been snatched."

Unfortunately the most important letter of the series, giving an account of the surrender, is missing, having either been lost or perhaps disposed of. The gap is filled, however, by a note

from Comte de Grasse, and later on a letter from Washington, through both of which Lee was to realize that his untiring exertions were at last rewarded, so far as the military situation was concerned.

The note from Comte de Grasse, dated October 20, 1781, and sent by express boat, reads:

"I have the honour to thank Your Excellency for the intelligence you have been pleased to communicate. I have desired General Washington to send back my soldiers of whom he will probably no longer stand in need as Lord Cornwallis has surrendered, which perhaps you may not have heard before this reaches you."  
(1)

(1) Scharf's "History of Maryland"  
Vol. II, 462.

From Annapolis Governor Lee sent the news broadcast over the State. The broadcasting was of necessity a somewhat slower process than at present, but it was efficacious nevertheless. It was greeted by acclamation and by ringing of bells, diring of cannon, general conviviality and the illumination of the Cities of Baltimore and Annapolis.

On October 27th, Colonel McHenry sent his final missive, notifying Governor Lee that "the army is folding up its tents and I am preparing to leave in a few days to pay to Mrs. Lee and to you my most dear and affectionate respects". He

adds: "The Marquis will perhaps be of the party".

On November 21st, after a few weeks' rest at Mount Vernon, Washington himself passed through Annapolis on his way North, to the delight of the Citizens and the joy of the Governor and Legislature.

Then ensued a winter full of cares and hard work for the civil authorities of Maryland. Not only were the 13 original States, (some more, others less) in financial difficulties, but they were in the throes of starting a new form of Government. Thanks to the abilities of

the leaders and to the good sense and good will of the Americans of those days, the new Federation, in spite of bickerings and local disturbances, finally won out.

In the Spring of 1782, things began to mend in the little State of Maryland, and the Governor and Legislature ventured to appoint a day in June for the celebration of the birth of a Dauphin to the Sovereigns of France. According to the Chronicler "an elegant dinner was served in Baltimore on the occasion."

The French troops which had spent the winter at Williamsburg, arrived early in July under the command of the Comte de Rochambeau, who with his officers was invited to Annapolis by Governor Lee on the "glorious fourth". They were shown the greatest hospitality and were presented by the Legislature with the usual illuminated Address expressing the Members' "warmest thanks and gratitude for the distinguished part you sustained in the reduction of Yorktown".

The soldiers remained encamped in and around Baltimore until August 24th,

and it is interesting to know that they conducted themselves with the same propriety and discipline which they had observed ever since their arrival in America. There were no claims for damages to property and all supplies were paid for in cash. That the citizens appreciated their behaviour is shown by Rochambeau's note to the merchants of Baltimore, in which he says:

"It cannot but be agreeable to me and to the troops under my Command to perceive that the discipline observed by them is appreciated by you, the inhabitants of this State, as it assures us of the good will we have always been anxious to maintain with our Allies. Your willingness to receive us into your houses and your attentive politeness to

us have been a sufficient return for the services we have been so happy as to render you." (1)

In November 1782, Governor Lee's term of office came to an end. He "who had so ably discharged the duties of his office" was ineligible for re-election under Constitutional limitation. His services were recognized by both Houses of the Legislature who stated in their address that the "faithful execution of the trust reposed in you, together with your genteel and polite deportment towards all ranks, have given general satis-

(1) Scharf. Vol. II, page 487.

faction." (1)

Governor Lee, in his dignified reply, expressed himself as being "happy to have executed the power entrusted to me to the satisfaction of my Country". He added that:

"If my endeavours to support the dignity of my office have exceeded the strict bounds of economy, I was influenced by zeal for the honour of my Country and the desire of evincing the esteem and affection which this State entertains for the illustrious Ally and his generous subjects".

After these busy years, Governor Lee was nominated or elected to the following important positions:

1783-84. Appointed delegate to

(1). Scharf. Vol. II, page 487.

the Continental Congress.

1787. April 2nd, appointed to attend the meeting at Philadelphia of the Constitutional Convention.
- 1792-94. Appointed Governor of Maryland to fill an unexpired term. During this time Governor Lee called out the militia to suppress an insurrection in Western Maryland. For this action he received the approbation of President Washington who directed General Knox, then Secretary of War, to express "his deep appreciation and cordial thanks for your zealous and effectual cooperation in calling out the militia." Letter of December 8, 1794.

1794. July 25th, appointed by the President to be a Commissioner for the City of Washington. Declined.
1794. Elected a member of the Maryland Senate. Declined.
1798. Elected Governor of Maryland for the third time. Declined.

Governor Lee devoted 17 years to the service of his country in one public capacity or another, somewhat to the detriment of his private fortune, and retired to private life at the comparatively early age of 53. He then went to live at his home in Frederick County and devoted himself assiduously to the congenial task of cultivating his estate, as

letters to his family and friends bear witness. Mrs. Lee died in 1805 to his great sorrow. His daughter, Miss Eliza Lee, then presided over his household and continued the custom instituted during the life of his wife, of spending their winters in Georgetown. Here were gathered at this time all the prominent members of the social, political and diplomatic life in Washington. Notes in the family archives from President Madison and others testify to the agreeable society of those days and to the share which the Lee household took in the life of what was then

residential Washington.

After his daughter's marriage to Mr. Outerbridge Horsey, a Senator from Delaware, Governor Lee remained almost continuously in his country home in more or less seclusion, for neighbours were few and far between, and his family of sons were scattered. One of them, William Lee, finally settled near him and later, Mr. and Mrs. Horsey came to live on her portion of the estate.

Though Mrs. Lee inherited her father's place, the Digges' Manor in Upper Marlborough came to her only after the death of her Stepmother, and the

family seems to have made but short stays there. Some years after her death, Governor Lee caused to be erected on a part of the Merryland Tract (at a place now known as Petersville) a church "to be called St. Mary's after my beloved wife, your Sainted Mother." This Church still serves as a parish Church.

In the year 1819, Governor Lee died at his home, Needwood, having outlived General Washington and many of his friends of Revolutionary days. He was buried beside his wife at Melwood Manor and their remains were later removed to the cemetery of Upper Marlborough. Of

Melwood, but little remains. It was sold after Governor Lee's death, the Chapel and part of the house were pulled down, and the rest is now occupied by a Tenant farmer.

One can still see, however, traces of the paneling which has been torn from the rooms, but what remains, with the well-built walls and large rooms, gives an idea of what the place must have been in the days when young Lee wooed the daughter of the house.

C. L.

November 1, 1937.